

Clophill through the years

Clophill during the Great War

When the UK declared war on Germany on 4th August, 1914, life in Clophill started an irreversible change.

Many village men answered Lord Kitchener's call to enlist, mainly in the Army. Recruitment meetings were held on The Green and at the Cross Tree. The recruit had to be taller than 5 feet 3 inches and aged between 18 and 38.

In November 1914 three Clophill Boy Scouts - Alfred Jeffrey (16), Horace White (16), and William Sharman (15) joined the Beds. Territorials. The young men probably hadn't travelled far from Clophill, and saw this as an opportunity for adventure. They thought that we would easily beat the Germans and that they would be home for Christmas. But, of course, they were wrong and it turned into a long war of attrition. Horace White eventually joined the 13th Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment and was killed on the Somme aged just 18 years old.

By March 1915 56 men had volunteered. There was local pressure on young "eligible" men to enlist. After the Military Service Act (conscription) of January 1916 the total rose to over 100 men from the village.

An efficient mail service was set up as it was realised the letters from home were morale-boosters. Up to 12 million letters a week were delivered to the front lines. Families waited anxiously for news from the front.

The letters that the troops wrote home gave the impression that everything was going well. Letters were censored, ostensibly to stop secret information being made public but really to hide the horrors of war from families back home.

In October 1915 Corpl. H.L. Cunnington wrote to his brother, a pupil in the Modern School "*We are having a pretty good time, and getting shelled every few hours. It is great fun as long as you don't stop one, and you would enjoy it immensely if you were here.*"

The troops also enjoyed receiving parcels from home. In August, 1917, Private Harris wrote to his wife, saying he would like a parcel each week, but nothing expensive. "*Send some big arrowroot biscuits and one of your home-made cakes, and don't forget some tobacco and fags. I should also like some lard or dripping in a tin box. You know I should not ask for these things if I did not really want them.*"



Of course everyone dreaded getting an official letter saying that a loved one had been injured or worse still, had died. The Clophill War Memorial records the names of the 24 service men from the village who died. 13 were killed in action, 6 died of wounds, 4 from illness and 1 drowned.

The villagers did what they could to support the troops. Money was collected to send them parcels. Smokers received cigarettes and tobacco, and non-smokers Oxo cubes and chocolate. The men at the front sent back letters expressing their warmest thanks for the parcels sent out from the village.

Feeding the soldiers at the front was an important task and jam was a favourite. When there was a shortage of fruit and the government made an order that 3d a pound would be paid for blackberries. School children were given time off school to go collecting. In November 1917 Clophill school children collected 994 lbs of blackberries, the average weight per child being 11lbs 13ozs. In 1918 they picked 1,212 lbs which was sent away for jam-making.

At the end of 1917 people began to fear that the country was running out of food. Panic buying led to shortages and so in January 1918, the Ministry of Food decided to introduce rationing. Sugar was the first to be rationed and this was later followed by butchers' meat. Clophill, being a market gardening area, might have fared better than urban areas.

The Rector of St. Mary's Church, the Rev. Cecil Lloyd Matthews, left Clophill to become a Chaplain to the Forces. He spent two years at the front and reached the rank of Major. At the end of the war, in a letter of resignation he refers to some who have apparently criticised him. *"I feel that it would be extremely difficult with the memory of what was done and said while I was at the front to work amongst them again in the spirit which is fitting in a parish priest towards his people."* What he did to upset some of his congregation is not known.

Haynes Park was a training camp for Royal Engineers of the Signals Department. Many were billeted in Clophill and became a popular part of village life, marching to church, organising football matches, dances and concerts. The Parish Room was used as a Soldier's Room. Ladies of the village devoted their time to catering for the soldiers.

The Defence of the Realm Act introduced a lot of restrictions during the period of the war. The activities no longer permitted included flying kites, starting bonfires, buying binoculars, feeding wild animals bread, and discussing naval and military matters. Alcoholic beverages were watered down and pub opening times were restricted to noon–3pm and 6:30pm–9:30pm. Clophill, with its six public houses, must have been particularly affected.

In 1916 the Summer Time Act introduced daylight saving by moving the clocks forward by an hour. Some villagers were finding it difficult to adjust. In a letter sent by Mary Ann Diggins to her son, Harry, she says *"They have altered the time and the evenings do seem long."*

On receipt of the news of the signing of the armistice on 11th November 1918 and the cessation of hostilities, the church bells were rung and a thanks-giving service was held in the Parish Church. As the survivors, including the injured, returned home they must have had some interesting stories to tell about their experiences.

When the Treaty of Versailles was signed, on the 28th June 1919, it was reported that *"Throughout the village on Saturday evening, parishioners and visitors were in a most enthusiastic mood. Banners and flags were hoisted on the Church tower, and on chimney stacks at the principle residences. Rockets and other fireworks made things very lively, and the bells of St. Mary's Church rang out merrily. The report of guns was incessant, and the residents of the main street got little rest until the early hours of the morning. At the morning and evening services at St. Mary's on Sunday, the National Anthem and special hymns of thanksgiving were sung."*

In August, 1919, a village Victory And Peace Fête was held. It started with an open-air service of thanksgiving. A cricket match between "married" and "single" was won by the former. After the judging of the decorated cycles, prams and horse turnouts, a procession around village was lead by the Ampthill Band. Following the baby show (won by Myrtle Tiffin) a free tea for the children and a "substantial repast" for the adults was provided on the rectory lawn. To mark the occasion, upwards of 100 sailors and soldiers of the parish were the recipients of silver medals, provided by the parishioners and presented by the Mid-Beds MP, Max Townley. After the traditional country sports including egg and spoon race, three-legged race and the sack race, a huge bonfire and fireworks concluded the day's celebrations.



The war memorial is a lasting reminder of the "ultimate sacrifice" that 24 villagers made and the effect it must have had on their families and neighbours.